Avondale Mill Project

Interviewer: Edward N. Akin

Interviewee: Hal Summers

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A: Mr. Summers, what I would like to just start off with is you give me some impressions of how you began with Avondale Mills, what age you were, what your first job was, that sort of thing.

S: Well, I started at Georgia Tech, took electrical engineering, and it came out in the paper they had more engineers then they knew what to do with, that was right after the war in 1946--1945--Georgia Textile Manufacturing Association was hiring a lot of boys in the textile industry and also they gave a lot of money to the textile school at Georgia Tech, and so I changed over to textiles and I had never been in a textile mill. Lived in Birmingham all my life but I've never had gone into a plant. Then when I finished school, I went to the plant there in Birmingham and asked them if they could use me and they did hire me and put me on the training program.

A: This would have been in…

S: 1950. So I have not got a textile background, my family has none.

A: And so you began in the training program 1950.

S: That's right.

A: After, so I assume, so many months of training then they put you in charge of a specific department?

S: Yes, a few months training, then I went in as a quality control engineer looking after quality control for the plant in Birmingham and then in 1952 I was made foreman of the carding department.

A: During this time, I take it you had a pretty good relationship with the workers from what some of them have told me about you, that you seem to have tried to learn who they were and their background, this sort of thing. Overall, did it seem that most of the management was this way? I know that Mr. Donald Senior certainly was.

S: Yes, the Comers are really people-oriented. And they really believed in people and they stressed that with all the management and I think Avondale, on the whole, is that way. Of course naturally from time to time it won't be that way, but generally speaking we are really concerned about the people. We like them.

A: Now in the carding room most of your employees in that division would have been women, right?

S: No, it would have been about 50/50, I'd say.

A: Would do you want to venture a guess on dexterity, or things like that? Were women better than men?

S: Oh, yes, as far as using their fingers and things like that. Generally speaking that about the way it is.

A: And so you worked as the head of the carding room for how many years?

S: Oh, until the--I think about nine years, I believe about 1961, no it was along about 1964 I made assistant plant manager.

A: While you were--am I not correct that during this time the village itself was switched from ownership by the mill to worker-ownership? Of course, you were not directly involved in that, but were you able to get much scuttlebutt or info from the workers?

S: Yes...

A: How they reacted?

S: Yes, most of them appreciated the opportunity of Avondale selling the houses because they got them so cheap, for one thing.

A: Right. Most of them, what, about $2500?

S: Yes…

A: At the highest.

S: It was, of course... At that time $2500 was a whole lot more than it is right now. But still, that's real cheap. And the monthly or biweekly payments or however it came out was just practically nothing. And as long as they were paying on the house, they did not pay for any insurance. Avondale paid for the insurance. And so their only cost was paying for the house plus interest. And it was--I forget what the interest was, it was nominal though. It was real low.

A: Do you know why the mill did this? Was it just a sign of the times, or...?

S: Well, originally, the mill village was set up because people didn't have transportation and they had to live close by where they could come into work. Well, most everybody has got a car for the accessibility to a car and therefore you just had no need for it. Plus, the fact that to run a textile plant is a big enough job in itself without having to run a mill village. And so there is a lot of problems running a mill village and so Avondale decided just to get out of it completely.

A: And sold the workers houses. Of course along with that went things like the clinic and the kindergarten. They might have already been discontinued.

S: Well no, they kept the kindergarten in Birmingham, and the Community House. They kept that. Until they closed the plant down. I presume that if they had still had the mill there in Birmingham, I would think they'd still have both of those.

A: Because that serves as a focal point.

S: That's right, uh-huh.

A: It helps the community…

S: I'm just second guessing.

A: Right. In 1961 you became plant manager?

S: Assistant plant manager. It was later than 1961, about 1964 I'd say. Somewhere along in there. Assistant plant manager.

A: Now things like, of course, the bonus to the workers, the zero defects, had that program started?

S: No, the zero defects program started in March, first of March 1966. The reason why I know that is because I transferred to plant manager to Jackson, Georgia in February 1966 and as soon as I got there I found out two weeks later was the regional kickoff of the whole program over there. So I had a pretty good job.

A: Did things like the bonus program, did it seem to give workers added incentive that they wouldn't have ordinarily had?

S: I think it did. Of course I don't know when they changed it over, but I know it was sometime during the 50s that they paid profit-sharing every four weeks, based on the profits of the previous eight weeks. You know, drop off one four weeks and add another one four weeks. And that was more meaningful to them except the fact that it was not fair to the company, because during those periods of time, or used to be, that every summer there was a slack in textiles. It's not quite that way now; it's more even flow during the whole year.

A: So during the summer they would be getting profits that were during a downside.

S: Yeah, when the months was losing money there was nothing happening, so they changed it over to a yearly basis which is more fair.

A: Were the 50s, as far as American textiles, were these the boom years or was it already on the downturn at that time? As far as Japanese competition?

S: Well that… Part of the time I was not really, the first part of the 50s, I wasn't here too much, but I don't believe it really started hurting until the 60s. Latter part of the 50s and 60s whenever they started the Birmingham plant.

A: During the 15 then, the plant was, as the workers recall it, it was probably at its highest, as far as productivity.

S: Yeah, uh-huh.

A: And not worrying about any cutbacks or layouts.

S: That's right. And it was a normal thing… They all--the way I remember it back in those days was that everybody expected to be off two to three months in the summer time, or something like that. Just normal thing in most all the textile plants in the summer time to have a slump. Maybe not two or three months, but a period of time.

A: Now I gather, of course you had left the plant in '66 to go to another plant, but looking back was it just the Japanese textiles competition or was it a combination of that and age and other things that got the Birmingham plant?

S: Well first off, Birmingham plant was a older four-story plant and it didn't have the flow that modern plants have, but at the same time we have a four-story plant in Sylacauga, the largest plant, and they still operate and they make a profit. And that has some factor on it, but there's a couple other factors, too. Being right in the middle of Birmingham and a small area there you had no room for expansion and the taxes was real high in Birmingham. But I still think that if they didn't have the import problem didn't come up… I believe... my personal thinking was it would still be operating now.

A: and of course with Avondale there in Birmingham you also had labor competition with maybe some of the other mills that wouldn't have to worry about. You had TCI and other major industries.

S: That's right. According to what one salesman told me, he went to a customer of his that makes--at that time--men's dress shirts, sports shirts, you know plaids, and things made out of the type of goods that we were making at the Birmingham plant and he made shirts and this customer told him that if Avondale gave him the cloth, he could not afford to take it. Because he could get the shirts made in Japan and shipped over here cheaper than if we gave him the cloth. He may have been stretching the fact, but anyways he said that if Avondale gave the cloth it would cost him more money than to have it shipped.

A: With American labor. Having to use American labor to do any selected to do the piecework.

S: See, when you're making light-weight goods the labor cost is a bigger factor than it is on heavy-weight goods. Now the heavy-weight goods like denim and things like that, we have problems with imports but not as much problem as with the light weight goods. They just about took over all the light weight goods.

A: Is this because with things like denim, this is more machine oriented?

S: One operator is a heavier weight and so you might say that one operator could make four or five times as many heavy-weight goods as a light-weight worker.

A: Right.

S: Therefore the unit cost per labor is per pound or per yard.

A: Oh yes, I see.

S: Was a whole lot more in the lightweight goods than in heavyweight goods. Therefore you had more disadvantage in that area with foreign imports because of the labor market being cheaper.

A: Well now during your years in the Birmingham plant they were primarily making the lightweight goods?

S: Oh, that's all it was.

A: Right.

S: As we call them, dress goods for women's dresses and men's sports shirts, real light weight, 100% cotton.

A: Things like summer wear.

S: Yeah.

A: You had gone to a combination then the time it closed to polyester cotton.

S. Yes. Uh-huh.

A: Well what about, uh, getting back to this competition with the other types of mills there in Birmingham, did there seem to be a problem with getting labor that could do this type of work and that were skilled and who would stay with the Birmingham Mills?

S: There again, once you get a person that stayed with Avondale and they worked to or three years to get his seniority enough to get in the profit-sharing program, will they usually stayed pretty good. But getting them to that point was a problem. You'd have some to leave for a higher paying job but not too many.

A: Now you were also there during the time of transition from Donald Senior's heading up the mill to when Donald Junior comes in and the other…

S: Mr. Craig Smith.

A: Right, Craig Smith, and then Junior. Did the company become more, have a higher degree of organizational structure or is it still pretty much of the family Gets together and discusses things and then the decision is made or is there more interplay, you know, up and down the line?

S: Well, most decisions are made by... the Comers give us opportunity to make decisions. But naturally...they act as a board of directors. Just as any board of directors and we have our policies to follow just like any company does, but our hands are not tied.

A: What about the, of course part of this was already occurring by the time you came with the mill, this transition from the organizational headquarters being in Birmingham and then moving to Sylacauga, what was the reasoning behind this?

S: Well really, I may be wrong on this, but our selling agent used to be Southeastern Cottons in New York City. And they moved, I don't know about the date--sometime in the 50s-- two Birmingham as the headquarters of selling.

A: _____ (??)

S: That's right. Old Comer building, I don't know if it's called the Comer building now or not.

A: Yes it is.

S: Top floor there. And then they moved the selling agency down to Sylacauga. Now as far as the corporate headquarters, I thought it was in Sylacauga all the time, I don't know. Now Mr. Comer Sr.--Donald Sr. -- he had his office in the Birmingham plant. He wasn't there too often while I was the plant manager.

A: So most of the time after the 30s for the mid-40s then he was spending most of his time down in the Valley area?

S: I presume so. I just really don't know. I know that the boys, the personnel man and the vice president to personnel and what they called them at the time, the general manager, call him right now as Vice-President of manufacturing, but all of those people were in Sylacauga at that time, in 1950 they were.

A: Now it seems like a lot of the personnel that's now moving toward the top, if I can use the term, did get their start at the Birmingham Mill. I noticed Uncle Orville had mentioned you and had mentioned Mr. Morris had also gotten his start at the Birmingham Mills.

S: Had quite a few. Doug Dickey is plant manager of a largest plant--he got his start there.

A: Do you think there is that much to the myth that the workers in the village seem to hold near and dear to the thing of Mr. Donald Sr. had still been living, the Birmingham plant would still be functioning? Was he that non-business oriented?

S: I don't think so. There again, Avondale is really like I said a while ago, people related, the Comers are. And you take during the time that two or three years ago, when the carpet-yarn mills were having a rough time and a lot of the big companies closed the mill down. We did not. And I think the Comers would do anything in the world to keep from closing the mill down.

A: So they were stockpiling goods during these rough times?

S: Stockpiling as much as possible than just let people draw unemployment. And I don't know what will happen next time. They maybe will close one down next time, but generally speaking they...a job with Avondale and you're running a job, they'll do everything in the world to keep you from losing your job. But at the same time, you have to be realistic and I believe--it's my personal opinion that if Donald Sr. was still living he would stop that and we would still close the plant down. Now this is my opinion.

A: Because once it becomes economically infeasible, it just becomes an Albatross, it seemed to me.

S: And I'll tell you, Mr. Smith and Mr. Donald Comer Jr.--they are closely related... I don't mean closely related, to Mr. Donald Sr. as far as being...

A:...plain type...

S: Yeah, they believe in really being close to people and listening to them and being concerned with their problems.

A: One of the jokes, or whatever, coming out of the Village is how Mr. Donald Sr. always kept one step ahead of the trade unions and I take it this is still occurring. Things like wages, bonus situation, this sort of thing. Of course this is especially important right now with the attempt to crack J.P. Stevens, that sort of thing. Do you think that Avondale Mills will continue to be able to be independent?

S: I believe they will because we have things that unions don't have, still keep one step ahead of them. I won't say in every area, one area there might be, a union plant might be ahead of us, but just thinking overall we are ahead of any union mill we know of, union plant, in textiles.

A: Now, of course, over the years Avondale has expanded to take in, how do you pronounce it?

S: "Co-WIK-ee." Might be "CO-wik-ee."

A: Depends on which Indian you're talking to. During this expansion has there been great diversification of the goods from the strict apparel type thing?

S: Well, really bringing them in did not make us more diversified. They are knitting yarn spinners, in other words they make yarn for the knitting trade and do some weaving. We've hired in both of those now. In 1968, I don't know when it was...sometime in the 60s when Avondale went into the knitting end of it. And they're more diversified that way.

A: Getting back to the Birmingham Mill one again, do you know if there was any discussion, when they closed it down in, what, '71, what year was it? '72? Right in there somewhere.

S: I don't know what year it was.

A: Was there any discussion of turning it over to the city or making it into a historical museum or monument?

S: I haven't heard a thing about it. I know the city said they couldn't afford to make Sloss Field a monument and I would think Sloss Field would be a bigger monument than Avondale would be.

A: That's true.

S: And so I hadn't heard anything about the other one, so all I know is if they had offered it, the city couldn't afford it.

A: And so in summing up the Birmingham-Avondale situation, it is more that it was a victim of changing times, modernization, wouldn't that be the better way to put it? That it had served its purpose, it had provided a way for the other mills to get a start.

S: Yeah, I would. There again, I'm using my own personal opinion, I would think that if it would [have] been most other industries in the textiles and most other related fields too, that Avondale would have closed down, oh, eight to ten years earlier in Birmingham.

A: If it would have been just hard nose business decision, not worrying about the workers.

S: That's my opinion.

[END OF INTERVIEW]